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ABSTRACT

Lev Vygotsky, in his book "Thought and Language," explores the relationship between thought and language. In school, children discover that there is a code (writing) that represents words. Writing is often difficult for students because it is an abstraction in which words are replaced by images of words, it is speech without an intermediary, it requires analytic action, and it results in a permanent product. In producing writing, students must use scientific concepts (the result of analysis and learning under conscious control) rather than spontaneous concepts (formed as the result of "everyday experience" not necessarily under conscious control). Instruction helps students gain control of spontaneous thought and should begin with oral communication, preferably group communication, so that as students hear others' thoughts they will begin to gain control of their own thoughts, which will help them move from inner speech to written speech. Vygotsky provides a hierarchical structure of mental development and supports the belief that language provides a means whereby perceptions can be ordered and systematized. The teacher, then, is a teacher of thinking, helping students learn through the language operations of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. (TJ)

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VYGOTSKY REVISITED: WHAT'S BEHIND THE WORD?

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Vygotsky Revisited: What's Behind the Word?

Written communication is dependent on the writer's ability to relay thoughts to an abstract and displaced reader. This complicated procedure is accomplished through language which is fully understood by the persons involved. The writer must write in a coherent form; the reader's experiences must correspond in some way to the writer's concepts so that the content can be placed in a referential context. The reader must also be able to progress through certain analytical processes that match those of the writer in order to correlate his/her own thoughts with those of the writer. Equally important is the motivation of both persons to engage in the process of communication. It is only when the dynamics of these processes are fully utilized that there can be genuine communication between two persons whose physical bodies are temporally and spatially separate. That which lies behind the word - thought and language - is what gives it its vitality and form.

The relationship between thought and language has consistently been of interest to scholars, one of whom was Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky investigated the bond between thought and language empirically and drew some important conclusions based upon his findings. His work is pertinent to the interests of educators generally and English teachers particularly because their primary aim is to facilitate students' abilities to use language as a means of organizing and expressing thought. This is the rationale for reviewing Vygotsky's theory as it is postulated in his book Thought and Language.

According to Vygotsky, the genetic origins of thought and speech are different. Speech, in this context, is not language, but only the ability to evoke vocal sounds. Vygotsky believed that "language does not of

necessity depend on sound."[1] In the early stages of growth, speech is pre-intellectual; it is not a part of thought. Rather, it is completely physical and not unlike the sounds made by other animals. There is also a pre-linguistic phase in the development of thought and while it does not portend meaningful communication, this phase of thought evolution is of utmost importance to later mental development.

Though thought and speech spring from different roots, there is a union in the early stages of development. When children first learn that "each thing has a name, the greatest discovery of life has been made,"[2] for it is at this moment that "speech begins to serve intellect and thoughts begin to be spoken."[3]

This period is characterized by an inquisitiveness on the part of children and sudden increases in vocabulary. The capacity for naming is a prerequisite to the formation of generalizations. Once children begin to attach names to objects, thought and speech have united and then begin to influence behavior in a way that was not possible before the union.

Following the union of thought and speech, children progress rapidly in oral language. Young children talk most of their waking hours, for it is necessary to practice the newly acquired trait. While objective thought may not be possible, or is possible to a very limited degree, children at this stage have no problems expressing what they want to convey. What cannot be expressed in words is accomplished through gestures, facial expressions or other sounds. Young children are comfortable with language and each day brings a myriad of new objects to be explored.

When children enter school, however, new demands are placed on them. This natural phenomenon of oral language is disturbed as the teacher attempts to introduce written communication. Children learn that there is a code which represents words, and using the code is time consuming and un-

natural. This creates a problem for most children and many of them, we can safely say, grow into adulthood without a resolution.

Vygotsky offers three reasons for the difficulty that students often experience in writing in contrast to speaking:

1. "Written speech is a separate linguistic function differing from oral speech in both structure and mode of functioning."[4] In learning to write, one must be disengaged from the "sensory aspect of speech and replace words by images of words."[5] Vygotsky concludes that the "abstract quality of written speech is the main stumbling block."[6]

2. Writing is speech without an intermediary directed to an abstract or an imaginary person or "to no one in particular."[7] Immediate feedback may be impossible. In conversation, on the other hand, every thought originates from motivation in search of instant gratification. "Desire or need lead to request, question to answer, bewilderment to explanation."[8] Oral speech does not have to be consciously directed; the dynamics of the situation are apparent. Written speech is not characterized by the same spontaneity. It requires one to create a situation and make a personal representation before it is communicated.

3. Writing requires deliberate analytical action. One is not conscious of mental operations in speaking. In writing, however, one must be aware of the sound structure of each word, "dissect it and reproduce it in alphabetical symbols. Words must follow a prescribed form in order to make sentences."[9]

In addition to the reasons that Vygotsky offered, I would add another dimension which causes some students to hesitate to write. It is the permanence of the written word. Unlike the other language arts, in writing, a student produces a product which may be permanent. If another reads it, it can be attacked and sometimes it is viciously attacked by the teacher's

red pen. If it is not read, it is no less real to the student. What students write can serve to delight them at a later time or it can haunt them for the rest of their lives. The embodiment of words in written form is a reality that cannot be ignored.

Writing requires a boldness - the audacity to record what is believed. This is another reason why it makes some students uncomfortable, especially those students who have experienced a history of failure. What students think may be incorrect by some imposed standard, but the secret of ignorance does not have to be known unless it is communicated. If the communication is written and rejected by the receiver, this can be damaging to the spirit of the writer. Students who fail build up defenses for themselves and writing is one of the greatest threats that can be imagined. If school is viewed as a hostile environment and students perceive themselves as powerless in it, they are not anxious to reveal their inner thoughts in writing. Lerone Bennett, speaking at the College Section Meeting of the 1976 Convention of N.C.T.E. said: "There are no unengaged words. The word is a world and behind the word is a world view."[10] He thus implied that words are sociohistorically determined and are shaped and limited by one's individual experiences. Vygotsky's discussion of inner speech and its elaboration into written speech provides a framework within which some conclusions can be drawn about the sociohistoric nature of written speech.

Inner speech is described as speech for oneself as opposed to external speech which is for others. It consists of predicates only because the subjects are known to the thinker. As conceptualized, inner speech is difficult to understand unless the referents are internalized by the listener. When a student says "cool" or "far out" to a peer, there is complete understanding. There is no need to add the subjects because these words tell the whole story. It is frustrating to an evesdropping parent to attempt to

get meaning from a telephone conversation of a teenager, but it is equally disturbing to the child when mother and father speak in one word dialogue at the dinner table. Many English teachers have experienced the look of bewilderment on the face of students when they are told that a composition is incomprehensible. Such a composition is often context bound. It has meaning for the writer, but not necessarily for the reader even though the reader in this case is the teacher. While all writing need not be shared with a teacher, that which is shared should be accepted as the symbol of a particular student at a particular level of thought in a particular life history. In such an environment of freedom and acceptance, students' creativity will flourish.

It cannot be denied, however, that in order to improve their writing ability, students must experience a movement in their consciousness from that of an immediate self to those of the audience for which they write. In the words of Vygotsky: "the change from maximally compact inner speech to maximally detailed written speech requires what might be called deliberate semantics - deliberate structuring of the web of meaning."[11] This shift in perspective requires a sophistication that is lacking in many students. These students must perform an act which is foreign to their experiences. In addition to mastering the conventions of writing, they must employ the use of scientific concepts rather than spontaneous concepts - two terms which Vygotsky explains in great detail.

Spontaneous concepts are defined as those which are formed as a result of "everyday experiences." They are dependent on immediate perceptions of realities as they happen. Scientific concepts, on the contrary, are formed as a result of analysis which may be learned through instruction. Scientific concepts require conscious control. But these psychological functions appear in later stages of development after they have been practiced uncon-

sciously and spontaneously. Before a spontaneous function can be controlled, it must be first be possessed. Students, at any level, already possess a wealth of spontaneous concepts, but they may not have developed control of them to a point at which abstractions can be made in written language. It is with these spontaneous concepts that instruction must begin if we are to influence their development into higher forms of thought. Only when they are controlled can students communicate them in written language. Awareness or consciousness is the starting point. Instruction can be the guiding light which leads students along the path on which spontaneous thought originated toward consciousness and deliberate mastery.

Every written assignment should begin with oral communication. Students can initiate a stimulus or have one provided for them. The stimulus is developed into a topic after it is discussed. Vygotsky tells us that a concept can become subject to consciousness and control only when it is part of a generalized system. It must be related to superordinate concepts which are fully understood. Therefore, to force a topic on students without providing an opportunity for them to relate to it is to create a troublesome barrier. Students who are learning to write must experiment with ideas. Their own ideas are often egocentric at first, but as they listen to the ideas of others in meaningful and directed conversation, they will begin to decenter. Thus, group talk serves a useful function in the development of thought. According to Vygotsky, egocentric talk becomes inner speech and finally can become written speech. This evolutionary process can occur in classrooms. So, following an oral interchange, there should be a silent period which allows students a time for reflection and organization. Finally, students can be asked to write, and even then perfection cannot be expected. The first writing is an exercise in assimilating thoughts and recording them. This creates a raw product - which becomes refined as it

is touched up, added to or discarded. The written word is the end - not the beginning of teaching students to write.

If one holds with Vygotsky, there is a recognition that students change in their perspectives with age and experience. He provides a hierarchical structure of mental development and supports the belief that language provides a means whereby perceptions can be ordered and systematized. Education is viewed as a "kind of superstructure erected over maturation"[12] and while it is conceded that there is a minimum threshold at which instruction can begin, instruction does not "hobble behind development." On the contrary, Vygotsky emphatically asserts that "instruction precedes development and leads it. It must be aimed not so much at the ripe as at the ripening function."[13]

This belief is like sunshine on the horizon for those who believe that instruction does make a difference - that students can be taught to write. The cognitive and linguistic level at which students are operating become secondary to the kinds of learning experiences that can be provided through instruction. Indeed, instruction must be sympathetic to developmental levels, but challenging experiences can cause students to move to higher intellectual planes, for "instruction assists development."

Vygotsky has incorporated all of the language arts into his theory. The implication that can be drawn is that every teacher is a teacher of thinking. The labels that we attach to our specialties (Reading teacher, English teacher) are superficial, for no one can teach writing successfully without teaching reading, listening and speaking and the reverse of any of these is also true. Language operations are mutually dependent and they are all nourished by the development of thought.

Students will learn to listen, speak, read and write with proficiency if teachers concentrate on the dynamic relation of thought to word and as-

sist students in using what they already know to organize what they learn so that new ideas can be accepted or rejected according to personal perspectives. But, acceptance or rejection is not a whimsical affair. To do either of them intelligently requires that students become educated thinkers. This is the foundation for becoming creative and analytic writers. Thoughts can be transmitted to others or they can be recorded and revisited time and time again. Students who write will not lament in the words of O. Mandelstam as quoted in Thought and Language: "I have forgotten the word I intented to say and my thought unembodied returns to the realm of the shadows."[14]

Notes

1. Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, Thought and Language. trans. by Eugenia Haufmann and Gertrude Vakar. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1962. p. 38.
2. Vygotsky, op. cit., p. 43.
3. Ibid., p. 43.
4. Ibid., p. 98.
5. Ibid., p. 99.
6. Ibid., p. 99.
7. Ibid., p. 99.
8. Ibid., p. 99.
9. Ibid., p. 99.
10. Lerone Bennett, College Section Meeting. N.C.T.E. National Convention, 1976.
11. Vygotsky, op. cit., p. 100.
12. Ibid., p. 94.
13. Ibid., p. 104.
14. O. Madelstam, in Vygotsky, Thought and Language, p. 119.